



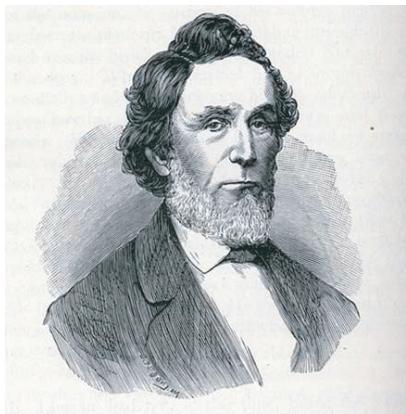
Mr. Lincoln's First Senate Bid



U.S. Capitol 1846

In the spring of 1854 U.S. Senator Stephen Douglas of Illinois maneuvered the Kansas-Nebraska Act through Congress. Never has an Act caused so much controversy. In the fall elections of 1854 candidates for elected office ran as being "for" or "against" the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The old "Whig" and "Democratic" party lines were blurred. Those "for" it claimed it was the democratic thing to do—to allow those moving out onto the Great Plains to decide for themselves whether they would have slavery or not. Those "against" said the Kansas-Nebraska Act went against the Founding Fathers intentions. They argued that the Founding Fathers had intended for slavery to eventually disappear and the Missouri Compromise [which the Kansas-Nebraska Act had overthrown] was just one in a series of steps taken by the Founding Fathers to phase out slavery.

Lincoln the Politician



William Herndon

In Illinois, candidates for the State legislature in 1854 ran under several party banners including Democrat, Whig, Republican, and Free Soilers. Abraham Lincoln ran for the State legislature as a Whig. At the conclusion of the November elections no one party had a majority in the legislature, but those "against" the Kansas-Nebraska Act believed they had a majority of thirteen [they were commonly called "Anti-Nebraskans"]. The problem would be for the "Anti-Nebraskans" to unite for one U. S. Senate candidate (Thomas 153-154).

There were several individuals who wanted to be the "Anti-Nebraska" U. S. Senator from Illinois. One was Abraham Lincoln who resigned his legislative seat to be eligible - oddly enough the special election to replace him elected a "Pro Kansas-Nebraska" man. Three days after the November election he was writing individual legislators, influential newspaper editors, and political friends (Findley 223-225). Lincoln wrote to a former client "You used to express a good deal of partiality for me; and if you are still so, now is the time. Some friends here are really for me, for the U. S. Senate." To a friend Lincoln wrote "I have really got it in my head to try to be United States Senator." (Collected Works V. II 286-290).

Lincoln was so diligent in seeking support during this period that his law partner, William Herndon said Lincoln slept "with one eye open." Judge David Davis, a long time friend of Lincoln, and John A. Logan, a strong "anti-Nebraska Democrat," threw their support behind Lincoln and worked diligently to convince legislators to vote for Lincoln. Long time Lincoln friends and associates Ward Hill Lamon and Leonard Swett were also buttonholing uncommitted legislators. And of course William Herndon, who had great influence among the abolitionists, was working to influence those abolitionists who felt Lincoln was not as strongly anti-slavery as they would like. (Donald 179-183).

Lincoln knew that to gain the Senate seat would be a difficult task. The "Anti-Nebraska" majority was slim. In February of 1855 the "Anti-Nebraska" caucus chose Abraham Lincoln as its candidate. He and his wife Mary plotted strategy in their back parlor, filling several tiny notebooks with the name and the anticipated partisan position of each legislator (Baker 149). As the day of the vote approached Lincoln felt confident of 47 votes. Because one legislator was absent, it would take 50 votes to gain the Senate seat (Donald 179-183).

The Democratic Party caucus chose the Senate incumbent James Shields, a pro Kansas-Nebraska Democrat, as its candidate. Shields was a strong ally of Stephen Douglas and had once challenged Lincoln to a duel in 1842 (Baker 149).

Five Democrats refused to join either the Democratic caucus or the "Anti-Nebraska" caucus. They hoped to hold the balance of power. They wanted Lyman Trumbull, an "Anti-Nebraska" Democrat, to be the U. S. Senator from Illinois (Roske 23-25). Trumbull, a life-long Democrat, was the husband of Julia Jayne, one of Mary Lincoln's closest friends and the bridesmaid at the Lincoln wedding (Baker 149).

On the first ballot Lincoln had 44 votes, Shields 41, and Trumbull 5. The other nine votes were spread over several candidates. The balloting continued on through several other ballots with no one gaining a majority. On the seventh ballot the Democrats switched their votes from Shields to Governor Joel A. Matteson, who had taken no position on the Kansas-Nebraska question, but who had led some to believe he was an "Anti-Nebraskan." On the eighth and ninth ballots Lincoln had 15 votes, Trumbull 35, and Matteson 47.

Lincoln knew Matteson was not an "Anti-Nebraskan" and to ensure a victory for the "Anti-Nebraskans" he told his supporters to vote for Trumbull. Some were not anxious

to do so, but Lincoln wanted an "anti-Nebraska" man to be elected so he told his supporters, "I'm for Trumbull " (Donald 184). On the tenth ballot "Anti-Nebraskan" Lyman Trumbull received enough votes to be chosen the U. S. Senator from Illinois (Thomas 153-155).

Lincoln could have won the Senate seat if the five "Anti-Nebraskan" Democrats would have voted for him, but they refused to. One, John A. Palmer later nominated Lincoln for the Vice Presidency at the 1856 Republican Convention and later became a leading Union General. Another, Norman Judd nominated Lincoln for the Presidency at the 1860 Republican Convention.

Later the "Anti-Nebraska" Democrats pledged to support Lincoln in the next Senate race. (Donald 183-185). By the time that 1858 Senate race came around all the various "Anti-Nebraska" elements had been combined into the Republican Party.

There were some hard feelings. Logan was furious at Lincoln's defeat. Judge Davis distrusted Trumbull and Judd, "as life long Democrats," but did manage to overcome his distrust to work with Judd to secure Lincoln the 1860 Republican Presidential nomination (Donald 185). Mary Lincoln became estranged from Julia Jayne Trumbull and never spoke to her again (Baker 149-150).



Senator Trumbull

Political Science 101

Today states hold popular elections to choose their U. S. Senators. But it has not always been that way. Prior to 1914 U. S. Senators were chosen by each state's legislature.

Prior to direct election of U. S. Senators, state legislatures used various methods to choose their U. S. Senators. In some states it was common practice for each party in a state legislature to hold a caucus before the state legislature met in its new session. Members of both houses of the legislature

belonging to the same party went to the party caucus. At the caucus the party would choose its candidate for the U. S. Senate seat. Therefore, the party holding a majority of the seats in a state legislature chose the U.S. Senators for the state. However, it was never quite so simple. Often there were third parties or a party caucus might not be able to settle on just one candidate and therefore three or more candidates would emerge. So often there was a lot of political maneuvering that took place to choose the U. S. Senator from a state.

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